

# BOOKS

## CHINA AS A POLAR GREAT POWER

*Author:* Anne-Marie Brady

*Published by:* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017, 290pp, £23.99.

In this book, University of Canterbury Professor Anne-Marie Brady delivers an impressive exposé of China's rapidly growing influence and 'undeclared foreign policy' in the world's polar regions (the Arctic and Antarctica). It contains an overview of China's history of involvement in these regions and of how China's 'Party-State-Military-Market' organisations frame and propel China's behaviour there. It also considers what China's polar efforts mean for the future of global governance and what they say about Beijing's views of its own place in the global order. The book's eight chapters are given real heft owing to Brady's understanding of the Chinese language. This affords her the ability to read between the lines of Chinese-language sources, and to pepper her chapters with insights from interviews with Chinese experts who provide more candid assessments than China's official polar discourse or propaganda organs allow.

China's interests in the regions are their immense economic, political and military-strategic potential, and Beijing's desire to ascend to super-power status, with access to the polar regions viewed as essential towards this end. Indeed, the deep seabed, outer space and polar regions have been identified by Beijing as 'new strategic frontiers', ripe with opportunities for exploitation. As such, Chinese scientists dub the Arctic a 'black treasure house', containing an estimated 22 per cent of the globe's total undiscovered oil and natural gas, as well as fishing, tourism, freshwater and bio-prospecting opportunities. China, located far from these regions, asserts that the Arctic and Antarctica are part of 'humanity's heritage', with one spokesperson explaining that China's population equals one-fifth of the global total and, as such, they ask 'why shouldn't we get a fifth of the interest in the Antarctic and Arctic?'

China's interest is also geopolitical, and it has moved to include the regions in the naval branch of its Belt and Road infrastructure initiatives. Furthermore, as climate change reduces ice in the Arctic, it will open up new navigable trade routes, enabling Beijing to reduce its dependence on shipping through the naval 'chokepoint' of the Strait of Malacca, and also reducing the abil-

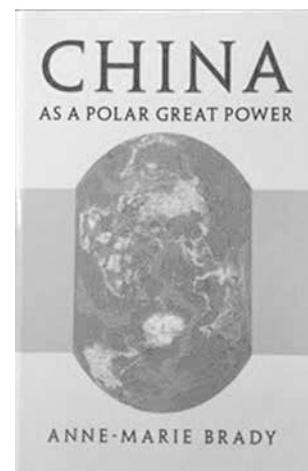
ity of the United States and its allies to blockade the Chinese mainland during a future conflict. Notably, maritime studies scholar Li Zhenfu has stated: 'Whoever controls the Arctic Ocean will control the new corridor for the world economy.' There are also implications for China's nuclear deterrent, as the trajectory of China's land-based nuclear missiles targeted at the United States and Russia transit the Arctic. Furthermore, key elements of Washington's expanding

US ballistic missile defence system (which Beijing fears are oriented towards its nuclear missile force) are located there, and future Arctic-based Chinese nuclear submarines could be critical in ensuring China can sustain a 'second strike' retaliatory blow in a nuclear conflict.

Beijing now spends approximately US\$30 million on its science polar research, and another \$30 million to operate its four Antarctic bases (with another planned), three research stations and an icebreaker. China's bases double as claims to large amounts of territory in these regions, and also feature its military assets (the latter often going unreported in China's official submissions under the remit of the Antarctic Treaty). Propaganda organs and Chinese scholars are also involved in ensuring the Chinese populace are aware of Beijing's Antarctic claims, with one scholar explaining that 'China and Antarctica's close links were forged millions of years ago as part of the history of the ancient super-continent of Gondwana'. Chinese geographic discoveries in these regions are also given titles with cultural and historical resonance, Chinese documentaries feature the polar regions, and Chinese scientists and officials are acutely sensitive to any hint they could be excluded from governance decision-making over emerging polar norms and rules.

As a relative latecomer to the polar regions, China pursues science collaboration ('the currency of Antarctic politics') with states that have existing programmes, and works through existing governance arrangements. In Antarctica, rules and norms are governed by the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, signed by the twelve signatories that were active in the region at the time. (Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States.) Devised during the Cold War, it largely sidestepped the different claims at the time of signing and prohibits new entrants to the region, like China, from establishing new ones. But China does not intend to be left out. It is positioning itself in anticipation that the 1959 ban on mineral exploitation will be cast aside after it ends in 2048.

Whereas governance mechanisms in Antarctica are somewhat settled, Arctic governance is less so. In the Arctic, the Arctic Council is composed of eight permanent members and eleven non-Arctic observers. (Permanent members include Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the



### Notes on reviewers

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United States; observer countries include Germany, Netherlands, Poland, United Kingdom, France, Spain, China, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Switzerland.) China joined in 2007. In the absence of a formal governance regime there, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea has influence and, while co-operative future scenarios are possible, so too is lawlessness and a scramble for resources. Given China's interests in the Arctic's potential resources, and the Arctic's relevance to nuclear deterrence calculations and potential for strategic space-related research, Beijing perceives a vital need to be a player there.

Brady's prescription for states concerned by China's rise is to engage and work with China to help it pursue its goals. Indeed, this is something many states appear to have welcomed owing to China's largesse and declining funds for their own polar programmes. At present, Chinese scientists in the Arctic work with those from Canada, Denmark, Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia and the United States, and an extensive programme of collaboration exists with Iceland. Yet some of Brady's own analysis suggests caution is warranted. For example, despite China's desire to become a global norm-maker, including in the polar regions, she notes that Beijing is prepared to ignore norms when they do not suit its interests. Beijing also has scant concern for the potential environmental outcomes of its behaviour at the poles. She also notes that if 'Chinese ambitions are successful, the inevitable outcome is a Sino-centric world that will make China the core node in a new globalized economic order' and that China, like rising powers throughout history, will inevitably 'challenge the existing order' — an order most of the states in the polar regions benefit from. Relatedly, while China, like all great powers, casts its behaviour as that of a 'defensive' state seeking to defend its interests (which in turn are expanding as its power grows), pursuing a non-interventionist/non-ideological foreign policy, this may not reassure states owing to Beijing's strategic ambiguity and lack of formal polar strategy (although Brady suggests one is in the offing). Additionally, there can no escape from ideology for human actors, and interventionist or non-interventionist foreign policies are instrumental — the latter currently suits Beijing's interests. If vital interests become threatened, China may very well set aside its 'non-ideology' for tactical reasons.

*China as a Polar Great Power* offers an excellent insight into the ambition of Beijing's leaders and China's efforts to secure a place for itself as a future super-power in the 21st century. It should appeal to practitioners and specialists of international relations alike, and offers an impressive base of knowledge to understand China's behaviour at the poles.

REUBEN STEFF

## **THE BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY AND THE MIDDLE KINGDOM America and China, 1776 to the Present**

*Author:* John Pomfret

*Published by:* Henry Holt and Co, New York, 2016, 704pp, \$9.99.

John Pomfret's historical portrait of relations between China and the United States, and among Chinese, Americans and

Chinese Americans, is sweeping, panoramic and replete with fascinating detail, much of it still relevant today.

Published shortly after Donald Trump's election as US president, and some time before Xi Jinping's affirmation as China's paramount leader in the Chinese Communist Party congress held in October 2017, the book was written too soon to explore the still-unpredictable nature of Sino-American relations in the Trump–Xi era.

But its fast-moving narrative and extended cast of characters are more than enough to remind us of the fact that for centuries Americans and Chinese have been locked in an intricate relationship of admiration, contempt, love and hate, mutual dependence and sometimes studied indifference. So whatever new economic, financial, political, military and security stresses and strains may emerge between Washington and Beijing in the months and years to come, and however extraordinary China's rise — or rather return — to pre-eminence in recent years has been, we gain a sense from the book that in many respects we have seen many of these stresses and strains before.

(By the way, if you are not a Chinese speaker and are confused by the title of the book, 'Beautiful Country' or 'Beautiful State' is the Chinese for America, *Mei guo*. Pomfret seems to suggest that this reflects a benign Chinese view of the United States, but that is not particularly so. Early Chinese reformers gave pleasant-sounding names to various Western states, and these have stuck. For example England in Chinese is *Ying guo*, 'Heroic State', and Germany is *De guo*, 'Virtuous State'.)

Pomfret considers his subject in several parts. The first two are in some ways the richest. The first describes the emerging relationship in the late 18th and 19th century. It tells how China was a source of inspiration to America's founders. Madison and Jefferson admired China's ability to prosper in isolation, and Thomas Paine compared Confucius to Jesus Christ. Early American traders were awed by the country's wealth and size, and some by its good government. This admiration from a distance was soon turned into more nuanced experiences at first hand. These began in the 1830s when one of the world's richest businessmen, Wu Bingjian (known to Westerners as Howqua), helped the American John Cushing become a successful trader in south China, the first of many. Not long after, in 1862, the first American minister — that is, ambassador — to China, Anson Burlingame, rode into Beijing on a sedan chair borrowed from the French to take up office in a tiny, cramped residence there.

People like Cushing and Burlingame paved the way for a growing number of Americans, among them many missionaries and adventurers. Some of these are familiar names. The freelance soldier Frederick Townsend Ward, for example, led his Ever Victorious Army to align with the forces of the powerful mandarin Li Hongzhang in crushing the massive Taiping rebellion in south China in the 1860s, even if Ward's motley troops may have played a less important role than Pomfret suggests. Other figures are less well known. They include the

